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Master of Arts in Art History

Eating Images and Making History:
The Fruits of the Martorana Convent

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Abstract

Using art historical methodologies, this paper examines the edible, sculptural simulacra known as frutta Martorana - a Sicilian confection that has been produced by monastic nuns from at least the Renaissance through today. The research investigates these objects for their ambivalent artistic, religious and historical implications - in part by investigating their usage in the Catholic rituals of the Festa dei Morti, or Day of the Dead, as well as by situating their place in Sicilian folkloric visual culture. This paper proposes that cuisine is a viable form of art in itself and that an overlooked simple confection can offer a profound glimpse into historical realities, and that by including the spectacular visual and artistic legacies of cuisine into the canon of art historical scholarship, history itself can be more fully explored and understood. Additionally, this paper aims to show that the myriad of living culinary traditions that ‘remake history’ everyday may be further recognized as worthy of preserving, not as out-dated kitsch or culinary nostalgia, but as inherently valuable artistic contributions to the contemporary world.
Dedication

To my colleagues of the inaugural class of 2017-18.
Acknowledgements

Primary thanks goes to the direction and encouragement of Professors Cornelia Lauf, Carolyn Smyth, and Lila Yawn for supporting my ideas and research. To Carmelo Nicotra, and the Museum of the Almond in Favara, Sicily, as well as to Library of the American Academy in Rome. Special thanks to the librarians at John Cabot University for their patient assistance.
Introduction

If one considers the immense world of Catholic visual art, images such as a glittering Byzantine mosaic or the seductive grace of Bernini’s Saint Teresa in Ecstasy may come to mind. Less likely would be a cherry-topped dome cake or miniature apple made of almond and sugar paste, and yet Sicilian confectionaries are among the most artistic and visually iconic in the world - and also intimately informed by Catholic traditions. Sicilian pastry traditions commonly combine architectural forms, colorful palettes and creative prowess. The marzipan confection known as the Frutta Martorana is a small representative sculptural sweet, molded to dimensions of approximately 3 cm. - 6 cm., and painted with bright pigments to simulate fruits, vegetables and other playful depictions of victuals. (figs. 1.1, 1.2). They are an emblematic example of Sicilian confectionary aesthetics, and also speak directly to Catholic history and traditions.

An individual sweet can stand alone as an ephemeral work of art, and the standard Sicilian techniques of finishing surfaces with smooth white fondant icing, hard candy shells, brightly painted pigments, shiny resins, and ornate, glistening candied fruit designs all serve to emphasize this resonant artistry. Food culture in Sicily has been entrenched in religious ritual for millennia, and Catholicism came to be expressed through the pious pastry production in monasteries from at least the eleventh century. Using art historical methodologies, this paper examines these edible simulacra, commonly referred to simply as Martorana, for their artistic, religious and historical implications - in part by investigating their usage in the Catholic rituals.

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of the *Festa dei Morti*, or Day of the Dead, as well as their place in Sicilian folkloric visual culture.

Chapter One begins with background and discussion on the literature, including an expanded discussion on the obstacles and benefits of studying food as art. Chapter Two delves into the histories of the two main ingredients of this confection, almonds and sugar, and traces their usage and perceived characteristics through the ages. Chapter Three briefly explores the culture of using food as spectacle in Italy in the Renaissance and Baroque periods, the overlap between Sicilian folkloric and pastry arts, and finishes with comparisons of Sicilian confections closely related to the *Martorana* by discussing religious and material commonalities. The aim of this paper is to propose: (1) that cuisine is a viable form of art in itself; (2) that a simple confection can be used as a profound glimpse into historical realities; (3) that, with adequate knowledge, the production and consumption of traditional recipes are an avenue to directly experience history, just as visual consumption of a painting or sculpture might be.

The *Martorana* are a captivating object for a variety of reasons. They express tension by being both a sculptural, painted object made for visual consumption, and an ephemeral, frivolous confection made for edible consumption. They simultaneously offer aspects of sensual delight while being used in somber religious death ritual. Their symbolic heritage is associated with nobility and piety, and yet are now seen as a kitsch, popular and ‘low’ culinary vestige. In short, the *Martorana* vacillate between high and low culture, art and gastronomy, religiosity and playfulness. In this sphere of opposites, they have been recreated for centuries in consistent material forms, and convey varied meanings depending on their historical context. As such, the

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3 For contemplations on the meaning and mood for practitioners of this Catholic holiday, see: Gertrude L. Schuelke, “These November Days Reflected in Rilke's Requiems.” *Monatshefte*, vol. 49, no. 4, (1957): 179–186.
Martorana are a compelling subject for art historical investigation. This research is especially necessary for the fact that there is a dearth of literature, much less scholarly literature. While it is exciting to unearth a fresh topic, this comes with obvious obstacles, and especially so within the time constraints of completing a Master’s thesis. Therefore, the following pages should be read as a beginning and an overview of the direction of the research and not a fully completed work.

In 2019, this author will conduct further archival research in Sicily at the La Biblioteca Facoltà Teologica di Sicilia, Biblioteca Comunale di Palermo; Archivio di Stato di Palermo and in Catania at the Biblioteca della Università degli Studi di Catania, as well as conduct interviews and collect a photographic log on the contemporary production, uses, and display traditions.
Chapter One  
Methodologies, Labels, and State of the Literature

i. Food in the Art Historical Context

Writing about food has likely been around as long as writing itself: Cookbooks, botanical treatises, and religious, medical, political and philosophical manuscripts on food and cuisine have been produced for millennia, starting c. 1700 B.C., if not earlier. Some of the earliest surviving artistic images also include representations of food and food culture such as the “bee collector” from the Araña caves in Spain c. 6000 B.C. (figs. 2.1, 2.2). It stands to reason that for as long as humans have created visual culture, part of that content included our most fundamental substance for survival.

Physical evidence of culture is the catalyst and raison d’etre of the field of art history; thus the art historian deals primarily with objects. The object speaks, and it is the art historian’s job to decode its language. Before unfolding my research findings, I first offer a brief examination on the complexities of placing an ephemeral, edible object into the art historical context. Ideally, the ‘language of the object’ can speak for itself, and yet the overlap of gastronomic and art historical studies is still - all things relative - in a stage of infancy. Included is an overview on the state of the literature, the challenges of categorization, and the often

4 Well known examples include: Babylonian tablets with decipherable recipes written in Akkadian dated to 1700 B.C., held by the Yale Peabody Museum; Apicius, De Re Coquinaria - a treatise on cooking in Roman Imperial households in the 1st Century A.D., and a tome of 600 Persian recipes by Ibn-Sayyar al-Warraq, 10th Century A.D.


6 For an extensive list of art historical examples which include food, see Peter Stuppies, Art and Food (Cambridge and London: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 1-2.
misused (and still sparse) vocabulary relating to the subject of ‘food as art’, which also merits discussion.

We know that food systems and culinary culture go beyond necessity to express artistic, political and social needs, but the study of material culture expressed through these systems is relatively recent. The field of anthropology began to include gastronomic inquiry in its repertoire about one hundred and fifty years ago.\textsuperscript{7} Since then, and especially since the work of Claude Levi-Strauss beginning from the 1950s, this aspect of culture has steadily grown to be recognized by social scientists as a way to identify social processes. In the words of anthropologist Sidney W. Mintz, food systems offer “political-economic value creation, symbolic value creation, and the social construction of memory.”\textsuperscript{8} While anthropology and sociology can reveal much about food culture, the multifold possibilities for food history studies is growing in popularity among scholars across various fields. Political science, theology and economics all have meaningful insights to gain and to share by including culinary history in their spheres of inquiry, while (this author believes) the field of art history may have the most to inherit by putting the culinary arts under its lens.

At the time of this writing, most libraries still categorize all food-related literature under “science and technology”, even while publications have grown dynamically beyond this.\textsuperscript{9} Awareness is growing that food and food culture have not only been represented throughout

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human history via artistic means, but grew and existed as a mode of complex communication and artistic creation within itself - the same way that any of the fine arts disciplines have, (painting, drawing, sculpture, etc). And if the current trend of understanding ‘food as art’ continues, perhaps soon the study of culinary creations will have their rightful place on art history shelves. For now there remains a gap between acceptance that artistry can be expressed through cuisine, to understanding cuisine can be art itself. My hope is that this research will serve as but one small step towards bridging this divide. Thankfully, new literature is helping to close this disconnect at a growing pace over the past three decades.

In 1999, Phyllis Pray Bober, seminal archeologist and art historian of the late twentieth century, published the first book of an intended three-volume series on the inclusion of cuisine into the category of ‘fine’ arts entitled Art, Culture and Cuisine. She passed away while working on the second volume, but the first book still offers the full indication of her intent and direction: A culmination of her traditional art historical work cross-pollinated with her life-long passion for cuisine and food culture. This combination of interests and professional experience gave Bober the insight and belief that these two fields should not be studied as separate entities. In fact, as she herself expresses - cuisine in its most elaborate form is nothing less than another aspect of the ‘high’ arts - the most refined expression of culture that a society can produce. She ranks cuisine right alongside painting, sculpture and music, all of which have long been considered elevated from base society and folkloric culture. Her approach is firmly academic, both

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11 Phyllis Pray Bober was a renowned scholar known for her wide array of interests. Some of her accomplishments include serving as the president of the College Art Association from 1988 to 1990; being elected to the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei in Rome in 1995 and to the American Philosophical Society in 1999 and, because of her work in culinary history, to the Dames d'Escoffier in 1995.

12 Bober, Art, Culture and Cuisine, 1.
archaeological and art historical, as can be seen in this comparison of ‘Muslim’ cuisine and Islamic architecture:

The sense of limitless and numberless units that expands architectural space at Cordova and elsewhere also pervades Islamic decoration. Muslim architects and craftsmen have reigned supreme in creating structures ornamented by encrustations of tile, and wood-, and plaster-, and leather-work that stun by color and intricacy of design and workmanship. To my mind, the cellular agglomeration of the ceiling hall in the Alhambra at Granada or scintillating networks of tile express, like Islamic calligraphy - indeed, like all Islamic art - the aesthetic principles of Muslim cuisine. A superabundance of multiple units mounded on platters or in North African tajines - heady with the aroma of attars and spices traditional to Persian and Arabic cuisine since antiquity, richly decorated in colorful patterns of dates, pomegranate seeds, or what have you - cumulatively resonates with all other Islamic arts in more ways than can be considered here.13 (See figs. 3.1, 3.2, 3.3).

In another passage, Bober sees the “ornate color play” of late Gothic table settings and banquet menus as a direct extension of high Gothic stained glass windows, exemplified also in the “shimmering jellies made red with sandalwood, or alkanet, blue by heliotrope or mulberries, green by parsley or other herbs, and yellow by saffron.”14 She also notes how the same classical order and elegant structure of a self-portrait by Nicolas Poussin can be seen in the presentation of a formal French menu of the same era.15 Equally provocative, how the aesthetic qualities of a twelfth century Chinese landscape painting reflect a classic Chinese banquet: “…the way in which the hand scroll becomes time growth, unrolling melodically, its voids as eloquent as its spaces, its ink as modulated in contrast and harmony as notes of music…Just so a classic Chinese banquet unfolds in musical refinement, the ebb and flow of its courses rhythmically punctuated by aromatic soups serving as transitions one to another.”16

13 Bober, Art, Culture and Cuisine, 9.

14 Bober, Art, Culture and Cuisine, 258.

15 Bober, Art, Culture and Cuisine, 6

16 Bober, Art, Culture and Cuisine, 8.
While Bober's elegant comparisons cannot in themselves confirm that cuisine is art, perhaps they can move the conversation to a more thought-provoking place. In the twenty years since she wrote this volume the exclusive categories of art and gastronomy have been further revealed as naturally overlapping and mutually inclusive. Yet, the most recent work of academic scholars of food history still maintain their methods, more or less, in either purely anthropological or classic historical veins.

Massimo Montanari, professor of Medieval history at the University of Bologna, is one of the world’s leading scholars of food history. In the preface of his book *The Culture of Food* (1996), Montanari offers an insight he arrived at while identifying and reconstructing fundamental aspects of food culture in Europe:

> I have become ever more convinced of the uselessness of ‘medieval’ as a traditional chronological category (a conviction shared by many scholars); it is a false entity with little interpretive worth. The events and values it presumes to contain are too varied and even contradictory to permit the attribution of a uniform historical significance….The chronology I have chosen to use in this book ignores academic periodization and as a result banishes the medieval altogether, dismantling and reassembling it in diverse parts. I have eliminated the ‘Middle Ages’ from both my vocabulary and mental horizon. This was not an easy challenge for me: it made me realize that even a ‘professional medievalist’ can occasionally make use of the category in order to simplify and to economize his discussion, thus avoiding the need to discover the essence of history and to compare himself with the people and ordinary daily activities of a past time. In the end, I felt freed as from a restrictive and artificial scaffolding that had prevented me from working and thinking freely. Needless to say, antiquity, the modern age and other such constructs also disappeared. There remain only people, things, ideas.

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17 Basque chef Ferran Adrià, since closing his world famous restaurant and “food laboratory” *El Bulli* in 2011, has held multiple gallery shows that expose the natural connections between chefs and artists. Italian chef Massimo Bottura revealed the levels of artistic facility and creative force that can be shown in a restaurant context when he opened *Osteria Francescana* in Modena, offending traditional culinary sensibilities to the point of a local boycott and risking bankruptcy, and eventually winning the coveted “Best Restaurant in the World” award from *Restaurant* magazine, (2016, 2018).

18 *e.g.* Massimo Montanari, Allen Grieco, Jean-Louis Flandrin, Carole Counihan, et al.

This research draws from Montanari’s insightful approach. The *frutta Martorana* is enigmatic -
defiant of the traditional ‘cuisine’ category via its usage as a sculptural display object and in
religious rites and rituals, meanwhile slipping from the conventional ‘art’ category via its aspect
as an edible sweet. Additionally, the lack of reliable source material regarding its dates of origin
and cultural and aesthetic evolutions demand creative research solutions. However, along with
atypical historical interrogations, equally critical for grounding the research are classical
approaches, informed especially by the writings of Allen Grieco and Jean-Louis Flandrin,
esteeemed peers of Montanari in the field of food historical research - and in particular by
Flandrin and Montanari’s ambitious collection, *Food: A Culinary History from Antiquity to the
Present* (1999), to which Grieco was a core contributor.

Apart from Bober’s seminal contribution, further acknowledgement for bridging food
historical scholarship and art historical methodologies goes to Javier Malagón, late Spanish
professor of the history and law of slavery. At the end of a lauded career, and somewhat ahead of
his time, Malagón published the exquisite *Historia y Leyenda del Mazapán* in 1990, a tome on
the history of Marzipan with a intensive use of art historical images. This hybrid genre has since
been continuously enriched with publications such as the quarterly journal, *Gastronomica: The
Journal of Critical Food Studies*, which began in 2001 and offers a venue for intellectual rigor
with an artistic eye: articles contain serious academic reflection and inquiry on the aesthetic
value and meaning of food and food culture. Additionally, a variety of art historians and
archeologists have recently published meaningful contributions such as *Tastes and Temptations:
Food and Art in Renaissance Italy* by John Varriano (2011), *Art and Appetite: American
Painting, Culture and Cuisine* by Nancy Siegal and Judith A. Barter (2013), and *The Taste of Art:
For the purposes of this research I have pulled from both academic and non-academic sources. There are an abundance of non-academic but informed food writers and journalists who publish carefully researched books and articles full of reliable information. Just a few of these names include Mary Taylor Simeti, with *Pomp and Sustenance: Twenty Five Centuries of Sicilian Food* (1991) and *Bitter Almonds* (2015); Clifford A. Wright, *Cucina Paradiso* (1992), and Matthew Fort, *Sweet Honey, Bitter Lemons* (2008). Salvatore Farina, Sicilian journalist and teacher of philosophy and history, published *Dolcezze di Sicilia: Storia e Tradizioni della Pasticceria Siciliana* (2006). Brimming with artistically crafted photographic images to accompany his historical investigations, this work helps expose Sicilian pastry traditions as an undeniable art form. Also essential have been historical cookbooks such as *De Honesta Voluptate et Valetudine* by Bartolomeo Sacchi (1475), and *La Scienza in Cucina e l'Arte di Mangiar Bene*, by Pellegrino Artusi (1891). Finally, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s historical fiction *The Leopard* (1958), was instrumental in understanding the culinary zeitgeist of nineteenth century Sicilian food culture with its poetic and accurate banquet descriptions.

ii. What’s In a Name

The name *Martorana* comes from Eloisa Martorana, a noblewoman and founder of a convent formerly attached to the Arab-Norman church Santa Maria dell’ Ammiraglio in

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20 The full name is *frutta Martorana*, presumably from the original creations which represented only fruits. Today the shortened name *Martorana* is most commonly used, and refers to the entire category of representations.
Palermo.\(^{21}\) (fig. 4.1). The convent was founded in 1143 for a clergy of Greek nuns, and fifty years later, in 1193, was converted into a convent for an order of Benedictine nuns. The original document that bequeathed the church to the care of the convent was written in both Greek and Arabic, and the Arabic section began with the customary ‘Praise be to Allah’.\(^{22}\) (fig. 4.2). This is a poignant reminder of the interwoven cultural fabric of the time, which showed itself no less in the convent pastry traditions and their Arabic influenced recipes. The church was annexed to the convent in 1434, and at that point the entire complex was referred to as simply “La Martorana.”\(^{23}\) In 1886, changing laws under the newly formed Kingdom of Italy allocated the church and convent to the state, and the nuns were forced to vacate.\(^{24}\) The church still stands as a splendid example of Arab-Norman architecture but the monastery is no longer extant.

Sicilian monasteries were bustling pastry and confectionary workshops for centuries, especially from the mid-sixteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries, and the Martorana convent was no exception.\(^{25}\) This specific convent was also esteemed for its courtyard of well-tended and abundant fruit trees, which were the catalyst for the creation of the *frutta* to begin with.\(^{26}\) At this point in the research, the origin story appears to exist solely as oral tradition. It is consistently told as follows, with incidental variations listed in parentheses: The nuns of the Martorana convent wanted to impress an Archbishop who was coming on an Easter visit, (or in Fall). Since


all their courtyard fruit trees were bare, (either due to a recent harvest, or because they had not
produced yet), the Mother Superior had the idea to sculpt and paint marzipan into the likenesses
of fruits and hang them from the tress. So impressed and delighted was the Archbishop with this
display, the nuns included this new creation in their repertoire of sweets production, and the
fashion spread from there throughout Sicily and eventually, as we see today, all over Italy and in
Italian pastry shops worldwide.

The sources for this re-telling of the legend were found in a variety of food history
oriented cookbooks and non-scholarly historical, travel and culinary magazines and websites.
None of these sources list a citation, and do not mention a date when the event may have
occurred - except for one. This anomaly comes from the exhibition in the Museo della Mandorla
in Favara, Sicily. The narrative given is entirely consistent with all other tellings, but also
includes a suggested date as either the late Middle Ages or the year 1535 on the occasion when
Charles V visited Palermo. All other sources found do not suggest even an epoch.27 Further
communication with the authors of the museum exhibition to request their source revealed they
had relied on a non-scholarly historical online blog (which itself offered no citations), and as
well on the details as told by elders in the town of Favara itself.28 Thus, at the time of this writing
it must suffice to accept a kernel of truth behind the narrative, and to approach the object with a
vast temporal lens.

27 A few sources that all repeat the origin story consistently, and all without source references or date:
Santoro, Palermo: The Churches of the “Martorana”; Tarantino and Terziani, “A Journey into the
Imaginary”; Simeti, Pomp and Sustenance; Wright, Clifford. Cucina Paradiso; Victoria Granof, Sweet

28 The wall panel in the museum states: “Si racconta che le orgogliose monache crearono queste piccole
opere d’arte culinaria per la prima volta new Basso Medioevo, nell’ambito dei preparativi per la vista
dell’arcivescovo (o dell’Imperatore Carlo V new 1535, stando a un’altra versione), per sostituire con esse i
frutti ormai raccolti dagli alberi del loro giardino, che era famous per essere splendido e florido, e
sbalordire l’illustre ospite.”
ii. **Form, Technique and Tradition**

As noted in the introduction, the *Martorana* are made from marzipan, also called *pasta reale* - royal paste. This mixture is traditionally made with a 50:50 ratio of ground sugar and ground almonds, sometimes with the addition of egg whites and/or honey as an additional binder. The marzipan is shaped to the desired state to dimensions generally between 3cm-6cm with the use of small plaster, wooden, or metal molds, and then carved further by hand. They are then dried between several and up to twenty-four hours, painted with edible pigments, and then sealed with resin for a shiny effect and longer preservation. Over the centuries, the term *frutta Martorana* has come to extend beyond representations of fruit, and now includes vegetables, seafood and even small figurines. This author’s research has yet to find historical images that might indicate what the early *Martorana* may have looked like. Contemporary versions are highly saturated with brightly colored hues and varying degrees of blending to convey a high level of realism. (fig. 5.1). We can assume the colors achieved in centuries past were less bold and more muted, as all-natural tints would have been used. The last layer of resin offers both a desired shine and longer shelf-life - in the words of one Sicilian *pasticciera*, it helps them to be preserved “forever.” While ‘forever’ is certainly an exaggeration, if well-sealed there are some

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30 For historical marzipan recipes see Appendix at end of this paper. For authentic recipes for the complete *frutta* see: Mary Taylor Simeti, *Pomp and Sustenance: Twenty-five Centuries of Sicilian Food*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1991): 245; and Farina, *Dolcezze*, Recipe Appendix.

31 This response came from an interview with a traditional *Martorana* producer in the Cosi Dunci pastry shop in Favara, Sicily, on 25/09/18 when questioned on shelf-life of the product. A similarly sweeping answer came from a marzipan making nun in Beirut on 13/09/18 when asked, “How long have the nuns here been making these the same way?”, she responded only, “too long.”
sculptures that sit in window displays for several decades without signs of degradation.\textsuperscript{32} Aside from a probable color difference, related culinary records indicate that the \textit{frutta Martorana} are likely still made the same way, to the same visual effect, even after several centuries of consistent production.\textsuperscript{33}

This could make the \textit{Martorana} both a living art historical relic and an anomaly in the culinary world - although not unique to the Sicilian culinary world. Part of the reason Sicilian pastries are globally renowned is due to the enduring nature of their traditions. Within the \textit{Martorana} tradition there appears to be aesthetic conventions according to type of fruit imitated. While these are not rigid by any means, there are patterns that can still be identified. Several types are often represented with a section split open to reveal the inner flesh, seeds, or kernel, while others are depicted whole and in tact.\textsuperscript{34} (figs. 6.1 and 6.2). While the origin story of the \textit{Martorana} cites only representations of fruit, the current standard repertoire seen in Sicily and Sicilian \textit{pasticcerie} all over Italy also includes vegetables (mainly corn, tomatoes, carrots and eggplant), and, more rarely, ornate displays of seafood, shells, coral, figurines and various holiday themes.\textsuperscript{35} (figs. 7.1. - 7.4). The goal of the artist is to produce the most realistic representation possible, sometimes in miniature and sometimes in true dimensions, including <!--insert footnotes here-->

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\item Granof, \textit{Sweet Sicily}, 37.
\item See Appendix I for comparative historical recipes on traditional marzipan which are more than 500 years apart, and yet express the exact same treatment and preparation. Likewise the pastry traditions of Sicily tend towards consistency over centuries. The confection known as the \textit{Minne di Sant’Agata}, or Breasts of Saint Agatha, are clearly depicted the same way today as in Tomasi di Lampedusa’s novel \textit{Il Gattopardo} set in mid-nineteenth century Sicily, and the modern \textit{cassata} cake is documented as having tenth century roots in Palermo. See Alexandre Metcalfe, \textit{The Muslims of Medieval Italy}, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009): 252.
\item This “open” display is most consistently used with oranges, watermelon, peaches, figs, almonds and pomegranates, while the “closed” versions are more often apricots, pears, prickly pears, persimmons, and tomatoes. This author has yet to find indications if these are modern conventions or consistent with their historical legacy.
\item Farina, \textit{Dolcezze}, 181.
\end{enumerate}
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moisture, bruises and small imperfections that would occur in nature. (figs. 8.1 and 8.2). Full displays most often reflect a trompe l’oeil of market scenes, the implications of which will be further addressed in Chapter Three.

iii. Shaping Narratives: Language and Labels

In step with the growing scholarly work of recent decades, the popular mainstream interest in gastronomy has experienced its own explosive cultural movements: cooking shows; food bloggers; food photographers; food stylists; food tourism; ecological and artisanal food movements, and increasing numbers of people seeking careers as chefs. These trends have pushed cultural boundaries, fostered creativity, and strengthened connections between the art and culinary worlds. The current climate also fosters a popular definition of ‘art’ that is vast, nebulous, and ever-shifting: Fashion is art, political protest is art, video montage is art, ad infinitum, ad nauseam. It is too easy to include ‘food’ in this list without considering why we do so. To convolute matters further, there is a vacuum of refined and subtle vocabulary to discuss food studies with adequate nuance.

In the context of popular culture, the idea that ‘food is art’ is suggested with casual frequency, and now accepted almost as cultural fact. It is unfortunate that the phrase itself is essentially meaningless, not only from the perspective of what is meant by the word ‘art’, but also via the use of the word ‘food’. Food is not art - food is a corn stalk rooted in the ground, or a paste of flour and water: Food is nourishment, function, necessity. ‘Cuisine’ is where function is surpassed by loftier intentions and becomes a distilled, measurable artistic expression of high
culture.\textsuperscript{36} It is this category of food culture in its true definition that concerns the research here.\textsuperscript{37} Thus the Martorana should not be called ‘food’ per se, being a part of a more complex culinary inheritance. Additionally, their modern subcategorization as ‘confection’ is historically inaccurate, and it is important to examine the object in situ, as it were. During the Renaissance all marzipan-based sweets belonged to a niche subset in Sicily which included comfits and preserved or candied fruits, and were intended to be consumed separately from meals as a small refreshment, or snack, especially during the Lenten fast.\textsuperscript{38} Chapter Two will now expand on the materials of sugar, almonds, and the resulting mixture of marzipan, and a brief survey will be given of their respectively unique historical, religious and symbolic particularities and uses.

\textsuperscript{36} Bober, Art, Culture and Cuisine, 9.

\textsuperscript{37} The frutta Martorana are among the only confection that are sometimes produced for display purposes alone. Others include the Sicilian tradition of pupi, or sugar dolls, and the related sugar skulls and small sculptures that are produced for Day of the Dead celebrations in México. Frida Montes de Oca Fiol is an art conservationist focussed on preservation techniques for sugar based sculptures produced for the Day of the Dead as celebrated in México. Fiol recognizes these as artworks worthy of preservation and not ephemeral confections. Her techniques and project can be read about in, “Ethnographic Collection of Sweets at the Museo Nacional de Anthrologia at Mexico City”, (Minas Gerais, Brasil: ANAIS DO VIII Congresso, Políticas de Preservação. Associação Brasileira de Conservadores/Restauradores de Bens Culturais, Nov. 1996), 15.

\textsuperscript{38} Simeti, Pomp and Sustenance, 224
Chapter 2
Meanings in Materiality

i. The Hidden Life of Ingredients

The mediums chosen to produce a work of art not only dictate the boundaries and contours of the expression but also connect the psychological state of both artist and viewer. Every material has cultural and historical weight and brings with it its own cargo of associations and nuances within its specific culture. When an artist or a patron chooses a material, the reasons are some combination of symbolic, aesthetic, economic, and/or practical. Choices may be based purely on the utility and accessibility to the material, or also its underlying communicative properties. An ancient bust made of porphyry does not offer the same message as an identical one made of terra cotta. This is because porphyry is a sturdy material known for its ancient associations to royalty, nobility, wealth and power; whereas terra cotta is easily associated with lower economic classes and temporal fragility. While the modern observer may not have associations of marzipan as more than a superfluous, sweet ingredient, a Medieval or Renaissance observer in the Mediterranean would likely have a different understanding, and this is the perspective that will hopefully be sharpened throughout the following pages.

ii. Sugar and Nobility

Originally from India, sugarcane was introduced to the European market from the Levant through Sicily.\(^39\) Arab forces conquered Sicily between 892-902 A.D., and Sicilian merchants

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began calling this new substance “the salt of the Arabs”\textsuperscript{40}. These conquerers brought not only this new crop but ways to use it with their penchant for various confections: candied fruits, nut pastes, and caramelized sugar-based sweets.\textsuperscript{41} By the time of the Norman invasion (1061-1091), sugarcane production was well established, and when Frederick II, Swabian ruler of the Staufen dynasty, died in 1250 A.D., he had laws in place that regulated the confectioner’s trade.\textsuperscript{42} This indicates that the development of sugar production and confection production were interwoven, and the sugarcane market supported a defining chapter in Sicilian culinary history. Preserves, jellies, comfits, and candied fruits emerged as part of the defining elite cultural character of Sicily, especially in western Sicily and Palermo.\textsuperscript{43} By the late fourteenth century, comfits were always given to visiting royalty and other dignitaries as a matter of well-established tradition.\textsuperscript{44} A lithograph shows the high volume and well-ordered systems in place in a mid-seventeenth century Sicilian sugar factory. (fig. 9.1).

The degree to which sugar had permeated the Italian culinary world is evident in a recipe written by Bartolomeo Sacchi\textsuperscript{45} in 1475, where he advised adding sugar to the Catalanian \textit{blancmange}, followed by an apology for giving such an obvious recommendation because “no

\textsuperscript{40} Tarantino and Terziana, “A Journey into the Imaginary,” 48.

\textsuperscript{41} Simeti, \textit{Pomp and Sustenance}, 224.

\textsuperscript{42} Simeti, \textit{Pomp and Sustenance}, 224.

\textsuperscript{43} Comfits refer to a hard-shelled candy that coats nuts, seeds or spices. The most commonly known in Italy now are \textit{Confetti}, or Jordan Almonds. In the early Renaissance they would often be aniseed, ginger, caraway, or even dried fruits. See Damiano Avanzato & Ignazio Vassallo, eds. \textit{Sulle Orme del Mandorlo (Amygdalus compunsi L.) passando per la Sicilia: Cultura e Cultura, Folclore e Storia, Tradizioni e Usi}, (Belgium: ISHS, 2006), 83-84.

\textsuperscript{44} Simeti, \textit{Pomp and Sustenance}, 224.

\textsuperscript{45} also called Platina, appointed Vatican librarian in 1475 by Pope Sixtus IV. His name more widely known among art historians for the depiction of his confirmation in a fresco by Merlozzo da Forli, c. 1477.
food refuses sugar”.

Bober also documented a Florentine blancmange - a classic dish for the fourteenth century elite of Florence - which includes capon, pine nuts, almonds, cloves, and sugar. The Sicilian tradition of offering confectionaries to nobles and dignitaries, as well as the above references to sugar in elite cooking practices could lead one to believe that by the early Renaissance sugar was an ingredient strictly connected with upper-class cuisine in Italy. However, sugar’s reach extended beyond social status to include the entire class spectrum, and, like almonds, its early frequent culinary use was founded in pharmacology.

iii. Sugar as Medicine

During the Middle Ages throughout Europe, and especially in France and Italy, the word “spices” referred specifically to exotic aromatics from abroad. Additionally, in the Medieval kitchen spices were more often, if not always, used for therapeutic benefits and not their flavors. Sugar was seen as one of these ‘Oriental spices’ and thus also understood as a type of medicine. It was understood as having digestive properties and, in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, it was used in confectionaries primarily for pharmacological reasons. As availability quickly grew through the tenth and eleventh centuries, both upper and lower classes

46 Quoted from Platina, *De Honesta Voluptate et Valetudine* in Montanari, *Food is Culture*, 120.

47 ‘Capon’ is a castrated rooster, a common food of the elite in Renaissance Italy. For more on blancmange, see Bober. *Art, Culture and Cuisine*, 212.


49 Flandrin, “Seasoning, Cooking and Dietetics”, 316.

50 Montanari. *Food is Culture*, 120.
began to add it to virtually every type of dish, both sweet and savory.\footnote{Montanari, \textit{Food is Culture}, 120.} In \textit{Le Viandier}, a seminal fourteenth century cookbook credited to Taillevent - chef to Charles V - forty percent of the recipes that called for sugar were intended for the sick and ailing.\footnote{Flandrin, “From Dietetics to Gastronomy: The Liberation of the Gourmet,” \textit{A Culinary History}, 424.} The same remained true throughout cookbooks of the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries in France.

It was not until the seventeenth century that French chefs prioritized a harmony of flavors over dietetic motivations.\footnote{Flandrin, “From Dietetics to Gastronomy,” \textit{A Culinary History}, 424.} As medical science progressed and changed, the view on dietetics were changing with it.\footnote{Dietetics refers to the branch of scientific understanding of nutrition, and is concerned with the diet and its effects on health.} One French physician’s opinion of sugar, written in 1606, clearly demonstrates this sea change in perception:

> Beneath its whiteness, sugar conceals a profound blackness, and beneath its sweetness lurks a harsh corrosiveness, as bad as that of aqua fortis. From it one can even derive a solvent capable of dissolving gold. People who have laid hands on the internal anatomy of things, and who penetrate beneath the outer skin, can say something about it, but not those who pretend to be learned without understanding a thing.\footnote{Joseph Duchesne, \textit{Le Pourtraict de la santé}, (1606), as quoted in Flandrin, “From Dietetics to Gastronomy,” \textit{A Culinary History}, 427.}

This doctor’s opinion is a far cry from Medieval medical treatises, or even the aforementioned writings of Platina in 1475, where he recommends the “harsh corrosiveness” of sugar to be sprinkled liberally on all foods without culinary rules or restraint.

While the French and the Italians shared philosophies during the Middle Ages on the palliative properties of sugar, they diverged in their affinity for the taste from the start. Overall, the French palette was far less inclined towards sweetness, which is why when the view of
dietetics and medical science changed, so their recipes mainly eliminated sugar.\textsuperscript{56} Meanwhile, from at least the thirteenth century, the culinary “sugar bowl” extended from Languedoc through the Italian peninsula and especially Sicily, (and, interestingly, included the British Isles).\textsuperscript{57} This orientation toward sweet food was not, according to Medieval food historian Bruno Laurioux, a product of the booming fourteenth century sugarcane production in Sicily, but that high production directly followed high demand. In short: taste came first.\textsuperscript{58} In Southern Italy by the late fifteenth century up to two thirds of cookbook recipes called for sugar.\textsuperscript{59} The contemporary practice of serving particularly sweet foods at the end of the meal (i.e. dessert) only came in to fashion in eighteenth century France, and then slowly trickled south.\textsuperscript{60} Before this, sweets, confections and fresh fruits were usually taken at the beginning of a meal, or in-between as snacks.

In the early seventeenth century sugar was included among basic food distributions to the poor in the Emilian Appenines along with wine, bread, cheese and oil.\textsuperscript{61} This usage as a staple food was likely influenced by sugar’s plunging prices when the New World began to produce sugarcane more efficiently using slave labor, to the result of higher yields than ever seen before in the European market since its introduction.\textsuperscript{62} (fig. 9.2). Thus sugar became a culturally dynamic ingredient, used as a medicinal remedy, to the heights of elite frivolity, and yet also

\textsuperscript{56} Bruno Laurioux, “Medieval Cooking,” \textit{A Culinary History}, 295-301.

\textsuperscript{57} Laurioux, “Medieval Cooking,” \textit{A Culinary History}, 295-301.

\textsuperscript{58} Laurioux, “Medieval Cooking,” \textit{A Culinary History}, 299.

\textsuperscript{59} Laurioux, “Medieval Cooking,” \textit{A Culinary History}, 299.

\textsuperscript{60} Flandrin, “Dietary Choices and Culinary Technique, 1500-1800,” \textit{A Culinary History}, 403.

\textsuperscript{61} Montanari, \textit{Food is Culture}, 121.


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accepted as a food for ‘everyone.’ As various foods were often categorized according to class and social status, this was exceptional. The next section will consider the history and perceived divine and medicinal qualities of almonds.

iii. A Divine History of Almonds

In a visual re-telling of the Greek myth about the love of Phyllis and Demophoön, Edward Burne-Jones captures the moment when Phyllis, after committing suicide and having been transformed by Athena into an almond tree, returns to her human form to embrace Demophoön upon his return. In her moment of re-transformation, the tree simultaneously blossoms. (fig. 10.1). Vincent Van Gogh chose to paint *Almond Blossom* as the gift for his brother Theo on the occasion of Theo’s newborn baby.63 (fig. 10.2). The almond tree is one of the first to bloom in Spring, and thus heralds new life, rebirth and also, in ancient times, immortality. This last point will now be explored further.

*Prunus Amygdalus L.* (almonds) are in the peach and plum family (genus *Prunus*)64, and are thought to be indigenous to the Tian Shan mountains that separate China from Kazakhstan.65 There are hundreds of varietals, and among these are two major categories of ‘sweet’ and ‘bitter’ (*prunus dulcis var. dulcis; prunus dulcis var. amara*). Traces of almonds were found in a Neolithic ‘pantry’ in Çatalhöyük, Anatolia, dated c. 7000 B.C.66 By 4000 B.C. almonds were


being widely cultivated in China, central and south Asia, and throughout the Middle East. They arrived in Greece around the time of Alexander the Great, moved West through Sicily into the Roman Empire no later than 300 B.C., across Northern Africa to Spain, by the 9th century had reached France, England and Germany, and were finally introduced by the Spanish to the Americas in the sixteenth century. Both the almond tree and its fruit (though literally the almond is the kernel of the fruit), have ancient cultural histories linked with love, spirituality, immortality and divinity. King Tutankhamen was buried with several handfuls of almonds to carry with him into the afterlife. Almond shells were found in several tombs in Carthage and Lilybaeum (now Marsala, Sicily).

In Medieval Jewish culinary tradition, almonds were recorded in dishes served during Yom Kippur and Passover. More allusions to the divine properties of the almond can be found in the Old Testament:

The Lord said to Moses, ‘Speak to the people of Israel, and get them rods, one for each father’s house…twelve rods…And the rod of the man whom I choose shall sprout’…And on the morrow Moses went into the tent of the testimony; and behold, the rod of Aaron had sprouted and put forth buds, and produced blossoms, and it bore ripe almonds.

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67 Allen, The Almond People, 3.
68 Avanzato, Sulle Orme del Mandorlo, 2.
71 Miguel-Angel Motis Dolader, “Mediterranean Jewish Diet and Traditions in the Middle Ages,” A Culinary History, 226-227. As of the 1990s, almonds were still included in the Passover meal by Jewish communities in Spain and Morocco, see Barcelò, Historia y Leyenda, 38.
72 Numbers: 17
And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, “Jeremiah, what do you see?” And I said, “I see a rod of almond.’ Then the Lord said to me, ‘You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it.”

Almonds also figure into the design of the Menorah. (fig. 11.1). According to the Torah, Moses was instructed to build a tabernacle in the desert and “make a lamp stand of pure gold…six branches shall issue from its sides…there shall be cups shaped like almond blossoms, each with a calyx and petals.”

In the context of Christian art and architecture, the mandorla, literally ‘almond’ in Italian, is an almond-shaped cradle and heraldic shield that became a symbol for the soul. (Fig. 11.2) The mandorla is also referred to as a ‘nimbus’, or a “luminous cloud or halo surrounding a supernatural being or a saint”. According to priest and theologian Jeffrey Cooper, “Jesus, surrounded by the mandorla, is the middle, interpenetrating reality between the two complete circles of human and divine, created and uncreated, heaven and earth, spirit and matter. In whichever form it is depicted the meaning is clear: God is revealed in the collision of opposites which Christ himself embodies.” From a more positivist point of view, an article entitled “The Shield and the Mandorla” by late Greek Classicist G.W. Elderkin shows us how the transition from the ancient Greek tradition of triumphal shields were absorbed into Christian iconography. Elderkin tell us that the “shield of glory was essentially continuous from Classical to Christian

73 Jeremiah 1:11
74 As quoted in Allen, The Almond People, 9.
75 Tarantino, “A Journey into the Imaginary,” 49.
Art.” In antiquity the forms were consistently round or oval, the almond shape slowly appeared in use by early Christians. The use of the mandorla as a symbolic throne for divine figures became the clear and dominant iconography by the early Middle Ages, and remained so well into the Renaissance. Its prominence is exampled by the stunning and monumental porta della mandorla carved by Nanni di Banco, completed in 1423 for the Duomo in Florence.

Whether preexisting divine associations with the almond caused the emergence of the mandorla form and its prolific usage in Christian iconography is a point of further research. While this shape in nature is relatively unique to the almond, it is possible that the form was not perceived as an almond, per se, and the associated name was given to the artistic form later in history. An added aspect that demands further research is the correlation between the almond shape and Christ as Mother, sometimes represented as an almond-shaped womb in Medieval manuscripts, as well as the wound in Christ’s side oft-depicted with an almond shape.

iv. Almonds in Medicine

In an illustrated discourse written in Venice in 1568 on palliative and curative botanicals, Doctor Pietro Andrea Matthioli includes a chapter on almonds. (fig.12.1). This manuscript might indicate the far-reaching impact the Arabs had on the Italian peninsula regarding


79 Non-religious cultural expressions related to the almond were also present in the Italian imagination. A 14th century madrigal from the Codex Squarcialupi is called “Sedendo All’Ombra D’una Bella Mandorla”. See C. Moore, “La Bella Mandorla.” *American Record Guide*, vol. 76, no. 1, (2013).

pharmacological beliefs. Medieval Arabic texts refers to properties in both sweet and bitter almonds that cleared the chest from asthma, chronic cough, and refined the lungs, liver and spleen, especially when taken together with honey. In Dr. Matthioli’s treatise, he wrote that bitter almonds are far more potent than the sweet varietals for their medicinal benefits, and can be used for headache, skin rashes and spots, ulcers, colic, and a host of other ailments. Whether are not these claims bear scientific weight, it is certain that the bitter variety are more powerful, as ingesting fifty raw bitter almonds can kill a healthy adult human being. While this potency was considered to have beneficial properties but also led to periods of suspicion and government control of in other parts of Europe - there was a prohibition on imported marzipan altogether in Germany until 1800. Before this point, only the pharmacologist could mix marzipan from his own approved store of almonds. The next section will more fully explore the legacy of marzipan. For the sake of brevity, it is not possible to include its wide-spread history in Germany, Spain and Mexico, and the discussion will remain focused on the Sicilian context.

v. Marzipan

“Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good.” -Psalm 34:8

As mentioned in Chapter One, a 50:50 mixture of ground sugar and ground almonds is known as marzipan, or pasta reale (royal paste). Given the various medicinal and spiritual

81 Avanzato, Sulle Orme del Mandorlo, 119.


83 ISRN Toxicology Report, 2013.

84 Avanzato, Sulle Orme del Mandorlo, 59.
properties attributed to these two base ingredients, not to mention their expressed aspects of elite culture, we cannot assume that only taste and/or preference as a sculpting material was the reason marzipan was chosen to make the fruits in the Martorana convent. This section will touch on the history of marzipan in the context of Sicily, and explore its uses in other pastries that align with the same artistic and cultural aspects as the frutta Martorana.

The origin of the word marzipan is disputed, and the etymological web is tangled with connections. The root word is sometimes attributed to the Arabic maysaban, which was a cake, possibly Persian, made with almonds and dried fruits.\(^{85}\) Another Arabic association is the phrase mantha-ban, which means ‘seated king’. One historian purports that the images of the seated Christ on Byzantine coins found throughout the Levant are connected to the naming of this ‘sacred paste’, as marzipan cakes could also have been a form of payment or trade in this region.\(^{86}\) The historically Moorish town of Toledo, Spain houses the San Clemente monastery which lays claim to the invention of marzipan. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that the emblem for the city figures two seated kings.\(^{87}\) A different possibility is from the Spanish masa-pan, as masa means paste, or dough, and pan means bread. Venice is yet another place that claims to be the birthplace of marzipan, and named it for their patron saint - pane di San Marco. A chronicle from the town of Lübeck, Germany dated 1407 describes that the cook of a noble household invented marzipan for a Marci panis (another version of the Bread of San Marco).\(^{88}\) Another, and perhaps stronger, possibility is that of the “March bread” or panius Martius in Latin, (Italian

\(^{85}\)Barceló, Historia y Leyenda, 25


\(^{88}\)Capel, “El Mazapán en el Mundo,” 33.
pane di Marzo, or marzopane). Panius Martius was a sweet cake of almonds offered to the gods during pagan ritual fasts in the Springtime in ancient Rome. These various tendrils deserve a chapter of their own for full exploration, but for now they must serve only to emphasize how the unclear history of the word reflects the story of marzipan itself, and to highlight some of the cultures and countries that are most intertwined with its story.

This complexity extends to the traditional confectionaries made with marzipan. The nuns of the Martorana convent had inherited a long and rich cultural legacy of sweets making, and one that was defined by centuries of foreign invasion. The ancient Greeks brought their own confectionary traditions onto Sicilian shores starting in c. 730 BC. Among these was a popular common cake made of ground almonds and honey, as noted by Sicilian poet and gastronomist Arquestrato di Gela in his writing *Hedypatheia* in the 4th century B.C. The Romans later conquered Sicily in the first Punic War (264-241 BC) and brought their own culinary preferences with them, and then the Byzantine Empire ruled from 535 A.D. to the mid-ninth century. Arabic forces conquered in the tenth century, and were arguably the single most influential artistic and culinary culture that ever landed on Sicilian soil. While all of the preceding conquerers brought with them traditions of various confections, especially combinations of sugar, honey and nut pastes (sesame, pistachio, walnut), it was the Arabic recipes and techniques that prevailed. We can not know for certain why the nuns of the Martorana convent chose marzipan over any other type of molding paste, but it is possible that the centuries-long spiritual and medicinal

89 Malagón, *Historia y Leyenda*, 25


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associations, as well as the religious iconography relating to almonds may have been factors. It is also possible that it was nothing but a matter of availability and circumstance.

It is tempting for the historian to project meaning where there may have been none. There are an abundance of classic and enduring recipes that have been created by accident, and this author allows for this possibility in the case of the *frutta Martorana*. However, among the many Sicilian small confectionary sculptures created by convent nuns, listed here are three that bear commonalities with the *frutta* in their religious functions and use of marzipan. This grouping includes: (1) the Paschal lambs of Favara; (2) the *olivetti di Sant’Agata*, or olives of Saint Agatha, and, (3) *le minne di Sant’Agata*, or breasts of Saint Agatha, also known as Virgin’s Breasts. All of these, like the *frutta Martorana*, are used to symbolize and/or negotiate Christian rites and festivals, and all have a history of convent production. To highlight the attachment people felt towards such convent delicacies, and to better understand them as more than empty frivolity - the following poem is illustrative. Written c. 1790 by Abbot Giovanni Meli, renowned Sicilian poet:

The Martorana, the Eden, paradise on earth,
I wish to praise with verse, with viol and horn.
Blessed the man these sisters deem of worth,
For here the fruits of marzipan are born.
How sweet the chestnut, sweet carob bean,
The plum, the apricot, the quince so round:
For such as these three Jesuits were seen

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93 One example being the French classic *tarte tatin*: an inverted tart that caramelizes the apples and sugar on the base of the pan. This was ‘invented’ at the Hotel Tatin in the 1880s near Paris, when owner Stephanie Tatin forgot to place the customary tart shell in the bottom of the pan before setting the apples inside. Realizing her mistake, she placed the pastry crust on top, and baked it ‘upside down’. The hotel became instantly famous for the recipe, and after its spread throughout France, it is included today in the canon of classics of French pastry. Another more recent example is the “Oops, I dropped the Lemon Tart” by 3-starred Michelin chef Massimo Bottura. While a round of lemon tarts were being plated for service to a large table of guests, one was dropped and broke to pieces. With none to replace it, chef Bottura ‘dropped’ them all, and created a smashed abstract palette on the plates. It is now a globally famous dessert in haute cuisine culture. It is too easy to invent history, and anything equally incidental may have been the case with the invention of the frutta Martorana.
To brawl and fight and roll upon the ground.94

The marzipan lambs made in Favara are a cultural legacy for this quiet town near Agrigento - an almond-growing region since ancient times. They are approximately seventy percent marzipan, filled with pistachio paste, and are sculpted with the use of plaster molds, just like the Martorana. (figs.13.1 and 13.2). This was begun by the nuns of the Collegio di Maria in the “Batia” neighborhood in Favara, in 1898.95 Easter is the one of the most important holidays of the Christian calendar, and carries the theme of the resurrection, or triumph of life over death / rebirth.96 The fact that these ornate lamb sculptures are meant to represent Christ (Agnus Dei) and are also meant to be eaten leads to a natural comparison with the Host taken at mass. Additionally, the ritual of creating an edible Lamb of God parallels the symbolic spiritual function of Easter: Food is life, and its consumption is both a form of death and simultaneous transformation into new life through cellular respiration in our very own bodies.97

Saint Agatha is the patron saint of Catania, in Eastern Sicily. In art she is usually depicted two different ways: Either looking towards heaven and holding her breasts on a platter like two halves of a melon, or in agony in the process of having them sliced off. (figs.14.1 and 14.2). Two famous marzipan confections are dedicated to her, and can be seen in almost every pastry

94 “Li così duci di li batti” as quoted in Simeti. Pomp and Sustenance, 223.

95 Provided by the Museo della Mandorla in Favara, September, 2018, as part of their permanent exhibition.

96 In antiquity the Greek myth associated with this same time of year was that of Aries, who sacrificed the golden ram in a tale of redemption, a shared theme with the tale of the sacrifice of “the lamb of God” (Jesus). See Farina, Dolcezze, 47.

97 Cellular respiration is the scientific term for the body’s process of converting food into energy, which can be likened to a plant’s process of photosynthesis. For more, see: Margaret (Peg) Johnson, “Learning about Cellular Respiration: An Active Approach Illustrating the Process of Scientific Inquiry,” The American Biology Teacher 60, no. 9 (1998): 685-89.
window throughout the city of Catania, year-round. The first are the *olivetti di Sant'Agata*, which are monochrome pale green, true to life representations of olives made from one hundred percent marzipan, a drop of rum, and green food coloring.\(^98\) (fig. 15.1). These originate from the story of when early Christian Agatha was being taken to jail and bent down to tie her shoe, where her hand touched the ground and olive tree appeared, fully grown and bearing fruit.\(^99\) The second confection, more widely known and sold, are the *minne di Sant'Agata*, breasts of Saint Agatha, also called *minni di Virgini*, or Virgin’s breasts (fig. 15.2). These are sweet ricotta cakes baked into a dome shape, covered with marzipan and a final glaze of pure white fondant, topped with a slice of bright preserved cherry. They represent the breasts of the saint, the symbol of her martyrdom.

Both the *olivetti* and the *minne* are made and eaten year-round, but especially during the festival of Saint Agatha on February 3rd-5th in Catania.\(^100\) In an act similar - though somewhat more macabre - to consuming a symbolic sacrificial ‘Lamb of God’, one is symbolically consuming the bodily ‘sacrifice’ of Saint Agatha. It is worth noting there may be even more weight behind this tradition: Catania was unique in the early Christianizing Roman world in that, whereas most cult followers of Isis transferred their iconography and faith to the Virgin Mary, only in this area Isis was identified directly with Agatha as Celestial Mother and protector.\(^101\) Adding more complexity to this unique object, the tensions between the grisly and sacred symbolism and the sexual undertones of ‘eating a breast’, is pointed out by Tomasi di Avanzato, *Sulle Orme del Mandorlo*, 88.


\(^99\) Like the origin story of the frutta, this tale has a number of variations. The one repeated here is taken from Farina, *Le Dolcezze*, 90.

\(^100\) Avanzato, *Sulle Orme del Mandorlo*, 90.

Lampedusa’s fictional character Don Fabrizio at a mid-19th century banquet in the novel *The Leopard*. I include an extended quotation here, as it is also an insightful reminder of the continued Sicilian tradition that a spectacle of sweets was deeply associated with the elite:  

Scorning the table of drinks, glittering with crystal and silver on the right, he moved left toward that of the sweetmeats. Huge blond *babas*, *Mont Blancs* snowy with whipped cream, cakes speckled with white almonds and green pistachio nuts, hillocks of chocolate-covered pastry, brown and rich as the topsoil of the Catanian plain from which, in fact, through many a twist and turn they had come, pink ices, champagne ices, coffee ices, all parfaits, which fell apart with the squelch as the knife cleft them, melody in major of crystallized cherries, acid notes of yellow pineapple, and those cakes called ‘triumphs of gluttony’ filled with green pistachio paste, and shameless ‘virgin’s cakes’ shaped like breasts. Don Fabrizio asked for some of these and, as he held them in his plate, looked like a profane caricature of St. Agatha…Why ever didn’t the Holy Office forbid these cakes when it had the chance? St. Agatha’s sliced off breasts sold by convents, devoured at dances! Well, well!  

The canon of sweets made by nuns in Sicily includes a vast number of other concoctions that most frequently use marzipan, pistachio, pine nuts, candied fruits, sesame, fondant, and in some cases chocolate. However, as noted, the three confections listed above fall into a pattern that aligns with the *Martorana*, not only merging in the material, sculptural methods, techniques and aesthetics, but also the religious functions. While the origins and history of marzipan in the Mediterranean is still in dispute, most, if not all, historians agree it arrived with the Arabs. The infusion of Islamic traditions into Christian convent life but one testament to the tapestry that is

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102 As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the association between sugar confections and dignitaries was a trademark of upper-class culture in Sicily that began at least in the 13th century, and here is still evidenced well into the 19th century. See Simeti, *Pomp and Sustenance*, 224.


104 See a comprehensive treatise on Sicilian sweets made by nuns in Farina, *Dolcezze*, 115-126.

Sicilian culture and history. Food writer and historian Clifford Wright suggests that the reason for this specific culinary adoption was due to events in the late eleventh century in a town now called Caltanissetta, from the Arabic *Qal’at al Nissa*, or ‘castle of women’. The town inherited the name from an Emir who kept an exceptionally large harem there, renowned for both its high numbers of women as well as their prolific pastry and sweets production. When the Normans conquered Sicily in 1080 A.D., most Muslim-Arab Sicilians fled into hiding, and, Wright proposes, it is probable these same harem women of *Qal’at al Nissa* feigned conversion and fled into Christian convents, bringing their culinary skills with them.106

This is a seductive legend, and further research will be conducted to find supporting sources for Wright’s theory. Suffice it to say there are surrounding details that make it a plausible line of enquiry. We know that Arab-Sicilians fled marauding Norman barons to the Western parts of Sicily, and specifically into Agrigento, Palermo, and Trapani.107 The suppression of Sicilian-Arabs lasted almost two centuries, and the final ‘end’ of this culture is seen as linked to the death of Frederick II in 1250 A.D.108 Knowing this, it is interesting that Caltanissetta is situated approximately thirty kilometers from Agrigento, where the Abbey of Santo Spirito was founded in 1290, and is famous to this day for their wide array of entirely almond and pistachio based confections, which includes a ‘sweet couscous’ made of pistachios.109 There is extensive evidence that pistachios and almonds mixed with sugar is an Arabic culinary legacy.110 It is clear that these cloistered Christian environments were definitively impacted by purely Arabic


110 Wright, *Cucina Paradiso*, 22.
confectionary traditions, even while they already had a long-established culinary culture before the Arab invasion. Of further interest is why the traditions were evidently so porous and malleable at the time, and subsequently became so well-protected and more rigidly reproduced for centuries until present-day. Part of the reason could be the subsequent centuries of Spanish rule, which had its own legacy of Moorish cuisine that may have helped preserve the pre-existing similarities in Sicily. This, again, requires further research.

Moving now from the material and returning to forms, Chapter Three explores the power and meaning of food as spectacle, and of edible images especially in relation to religious rite and ritual surrounding death. To shed light on the specific spiritual functions of the frutta Martorana, it will include a brief analysis of the Catholic Day of the Dead as celebrated in Sicily.

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111 For insights on pre-Arabic monastic culinary traditions in eastern Sicily, see Pavone, La Cucina dei Benedettini and Wright, Cucina Paradiso, 22. For Arabic culinary influences in Sicilian convents: Farina, Dolcezze, 113-127.

112 For a comprehensive overview of the influence of Moorish pastry traditions throughout the entire Mediterranean, see Malagón, Historia y Leyenda.
Chapter 3  
*Edible Images, Visual Consumption*

i. **The Beauty and Power of the Ephemeral: Food as Spectacle**

“Most noble of all the arts is architecture, and its greatest manifestation is the art of the pastry chef.”

--Antonin Carême, founder of *Modern French Grande Cuisine*

Massimo Montanari’s book “Food is Culture” explores the assertion that every aspect of the human relationship to food - hunting, farming, cooking, or eating - is an implicitly cultural act.\(^{113}\) If food is culture, most of the structures that shape it are informed by social and economic power.\(^{114}\) Food as spectacle has been a potent and effective method for communicating social and class dynamics throughout history. The type of plate a meal is served on, the timing and sequence of its consumption and even the way a fork is held, all offer ideas about who we are and our relationships to those around us, especially at the dinner of a king or ruler.

Elaborate practices using food as spectacle emerged in the early Renaissance through the Baroque periods in Italy.\(^{115}\) Based on contemporary descriptions from a guest at the noble wedding banquet of Lucrezia d’Este in 1487 in Bologna, Montanari writes:

[The] entire feast before arriving at the table, was paraded through the piazza so the people ‘might admire such magnificence’. Dishes were not presented one after the other, but rather displayed in large groups. Each diner chose according to his

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\(^{113}\) Montanari, *Food is Culture,*


or her preferences, but was expected above all to admire the abundance and quality of food, to marvel at the presentation and scenic invention, as if in the theatre. It was as much a show as a meal.\textsuperscript{116}

Among the platters paraded were “sugar and almond cakes…sweets made from milk, jellies, pastries, candies, marzipans’ and other similar flavors.”\textsuperscript{117} Much like the use of sugar-based sweets and confectionary, fruit and spectacle were equally intertwined. While in the Middle Ages dietetics lent suspicion towards fruit, it nevertheless remained associated with the elite, and high status was often conferred by the possession of fruit and/or fruit trees from antiquity through the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{118} Charlemagne’s biographers noted that he would eat fruit daily after lunch, and the renowned Carolingian St. Gall Monastery was famed for its fruit trees.\textsuperscript{119} A drawing of a royal banquet arrangement for the Duke of Newcastle in Windsor in 1650 shows the preeminence of fruit (as well as dessert and almonds) by their centralized display.\textsuperscript{120} (fig.16.1). A still life painting by François Desportes c. 1720 of a credenza adorned with silver, precious stones and a central pyramid of tree fruits (peaches, figs and apricots), highlights the continuing symbolic importance of fruit in association with the elite.\textsuperscript{121} (fig. 16.2). Marcia Reed notes in her book \emph{The Edible Monument: The Art of Food for Festivals}, that during the Renaissance and Baroque periods in Europe the main point of edible displays and food spectacle

\textsuperscript{116} Montanari, \textit{Food is Culture}, 93.

\textsuperscript{117} C. Ghirardacci, \textit{Historia de Bologna} in \textit{Rerum Italicarum Scriptores}, XXXIII/I, 235-4, quoted in Montanari, \textit{Food is Culture}, 92.

\textsuperscript{118} Reed, \textit{The Edible Monument}, 11-73. Grieco,“Food and Drink”, 45.

\textsuperscript{119} Bober, \textit{Art, Culture, and Cuisine}, 212.

\textsuperscript{120} Reed, \textit{The Edible Monument}, 55-56.

\textsuperscript{121} A credenza was literally a ‘cupboard’, but also referred to ornate displays of the finest housewares belonging to the host of a banquet, mostly consisting of crystal, porcelain, silver and gilt objects to assert the wealth of the host. See Reed, \textit{The Edible Monument}, 59-60; di Schino, \textit{Arte Dolciaria Barocca}, 129.
was to surprise, delight and entertain, yet she cautions that “festivals should never be seen as merely fanciful, frivolous parties…edibles not only ornamented significant celebrations…they also delineated social status [and] established and underlined social boundaries.”\(^\text{122}\)

An engraving of a banquet in the court of Versailles in 1676 demonstrates this well. (fig. 17.1). Here the central structure is made in a style after the column of Trajan which evokes a lineage to ancient power, underneath which the king and a limited number of guests are eating. A crowd stands on the periphery, held back by armed royal guards, present for the great ‘privilege’ of watching the king eat.\(^\text{123}\) A complete reversal of this structure were the rituals surrounding the *Macchine della Cuccagna* which began in Naples in the early seventeenth century, and later spread throughout Italy.\(^\text{124}\) These ephemeral monuments shaped like pyramids, temples or triumphal arches were constructed into a spectacle of edible foodstuffs, covered with breads, cheese and meats. (fig 17.2). They could also include spectacular non-edible elements such as fireworks that would explode from the mouths of suckling pigs.\(^\text{125}\) The *macchine* would be used for festivals, feast days, royal marriages or other noble celebrations.\(^\text{126}\) Set up in a public space, the upper classes and nobility would look from separated viewing points and watch while the peasant and working classes tore it apart and ate, “[creating] a tension between depicted ephemeral paradise where no one ever went hungry and the awkward earthbound scrambling of

\(^{122}\) Reed, *The Edible Monument*, 12-20.


\(^{124}\) In the 17th century *macchina* would have meant apparatus. The word *cuccagna* comes from the mythical land Cockaigne, or the ‘land of milk and honey’, where no one ever goes hungry, ages or works. See Reed, *The Edible Monument*, 87-99. Quotation ibid., 97.

\(^{125}\) Reed, *The Edible Monument*, 90-91.

\(^{126}\) Reed, *The Edible Monument*, 96.
the street people for sustenance and survival in the face of edible temptations.”

These spectacles were outlawed in the early eighteenth century after a series of deaths by trampling occurred. Our contemporary ideals about class equality might see these spectacles as abhorrent. However, in that time it is reasonable to project that both the upper and lower classes who partook in the affairs perceived them as a gesture of beneficence and largesse on the part of the nobility.

The food culture of Sicily was a definitive part of this trend of spectacles, especially utilizing the pastry and confectionary arts as expression of economic status. And while the origin story of the frutta Martorana has yet to be authenticated, it is a credible tale when its various aspects are contextualized. As noted in Chapter Two, by the late Middle Ages it was embedded tradition that dignitaries and nobles visiting Palermo would receive the most impressive comfits and confections available. Thus, already well-understood as honorific gifts, it makes sense that the nuns would have intended to offer confections to the Archbishop on his Easter visit to their convent. Additionally, given the pre-existing culture of spectacle and entertainment through use of ornate food displays, it also stands to reason that instead of presenting the Archbishop with a platter of sweets, the Mother Superior would have had the idea to mold various fruits from marzipan and hang them from the trees in a display to charm and

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127 Reed, The Edible Monument, 97.
128 Reed, The Edible Monument, 98.
129 Dr. Carolyn Smyth, Renaissance scholar, conversation with author, November 28th, 2018.
131 And these almost always produced in convents or monasteries, See Simeti, Pomp and Sustenance, 224.
enchant the eye. The current standard displays of the frutta that can be seen in pastry shops all over Sicily often reflect a trompe l’oeil of fruits and vegetables arranged in the style of produce markets. (figs. 18.1 and 18.2). This fashion extends throughout the Martorana tradition, and begs the question of whether the modern displays still resonate with the original event and its inherent association to food as spectacle.

As previously discussed, the frutta are ideally made to represent each individual piece of fruit as realistically as possible, including spots or bruising on the skin, a bead of juice flowing, or a wayward leaf or stem. In short, they are meant to reflect the small imperfections of nature - the same way that the nuns of the Martorana convent would have desired to when they filled their courtyard tress to fool and impress the Archbishop with a spectacle of their artistry. However, there may be more subtle and indirect reasons for the stylistic traditions of the frutta.

Even a superficial look at Sicilian art and aesthetics can reveal how deeply integrated the visual culture of Sicily is with food, agriculture and landscape, sometimes to the point of inseparability. The Martorana are but one example of this blending, and the next section will address the multifold dynamics at play in Sicilian art and artisanal visual culture.

ii. Food and Art: The Aesthetics of Sicily

In an example of the circular nature in which food and art can sometimes express itself in Sicily, a Martorana artist created a trompe l’oeil of a seafood counter inspired by the lower left quadrant of the painting La Vuccaria by Renato Guttoso (1974). (Figs. 19.1 and 19.2). The

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132 In addition to food as spectacle, the aspect of a playful ruse was not a new idea, as the “Unswept Floor” mosaic by Sosus of Pergamon, 2nd C B.C. demonstrates well. In this case the subject matter of the mosaic being the detritus of a meal could indicate it was also a memento mori, in line with other skeleton and food related mosaics of the ancient world discussed later in this chapter.
painting depicts a bustling open food market in Palermo. The cacophony of food forms pushed together, almost toppling down sidewalls and overpowering the human figures in the center with their verticality in a crowded symphony of colors all serve to communicate the primacy of food in Sicily to the viewer. And in this case when viewing these two related creations side by side - the _Martorana_ display representing the painted foods in a different edible form - can nearly provoke an attack of culinary Stendhal syndrome. To further demonstrate these interwoven realities, the following section will continue with a series of images, some comparative and some that speak alone.

The visual legacy of Sicilian folkloric art can evoke a mood of childlike enchantment, and author Maria Tarantino describes the process of researching pastry in Sicily as “an archeology of the imagination”. Sicilian cuisine, and especially its pastry and confectionary traditions, share a similar spirit with the rest of its artisanal crafts to such a degree one is tempted to classify both as one in the same. Dolls made of sugar, _pupi di zucchero_, are created in the likeness of the famous wooden marionettes, or _pupi di opera_, from the legendary Sicilian puppet theater (figs. 20.1 and 20.2). Indeed, with their ornate designs and historical narratives, it would be difficult to categorize these small sculptures as simple confection. Another example shows a pastry shop in Catania that displays a single life-sized _Martorana_ lemon under a glass dome, in a definitive gesture to emphasize its' artistic function. (fig. 21.1). Also in Catania, a boutique specializing in local artist’s work carry felted wool creations made in the shapes of the Breasts of Saint Agatha, the world-famous cannoli dessert, and the typical _Martorana_ forms of peppers and tomatoes (fig. 21.2). Another striking comparison comes from the typical radial and brightly-colored designs of the cassata cake. The cassata is an architectural pastry creation made with

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133 Tarantino, “A Journey into the Imaginary,” 45.
ricotta, marzipan, fondant and candied fruits. When mirrored with the painted mandala-like
designs of the *carretti*, or horse-carts, the cassata can be seen as an integral part of this aesthetic.
(figs. 22.1 and 22.2). This cross-pollination between food and visual culture also takes
contemporary forms, as seen in the felted wool ‘confections’ (fig. 21.2), and also in a modern
interpretation of an elephant - the city’s beloved historical emblem - by a Catanese artist. (fig.
23.1 and 23.2). Here an elephant form is in-filled with a simplified image of a watermelon slice.
In all these examples, both historical and contemporary, the artistic landscape of Sicily is
interlaced with food in a way that encourages a visceral-type of consumption.134

By way of introduction to the next and final section discussing *Martorana* and its uses in
the Day of the Dead rituals, here first is a cursory glance at the ineffable meanings of the
symbolic consumption of food and edible images. The late fourteenth century French word for a
type of large wafer cookie was *supplications* - a word that holds the same meaning in French as
in English. As the name implies, these types of cookies were only eaten on religious holidays or
placed on altars as offerings.135 In its early Christian form, the intricate Austrian-German
*Springerle* cookie tradition included designs of Adam and Eve, the Nativity, the Holy Family,
Madonna and Child, angels, fish, and the Paschal Lamb.136 Using the famously ornate Austro-
German *Springerle* cookies as inspiration, author Sharon Hudgins reflects on the power of
‘eating images’.

134 This degree of aesthetic blending and criss-crossing between art forms could be a typical trait of
island cultures, but also of places with long histories of multiple and continuous conquering forces. To
explore this would take studied comparisons of places with similar profiles such as Malta, Sardinia,
Cyprus, etc.


136 The dough is ‘printed’ from delicately carved wooden molds, the final cookie sometimes intended for
consumption and sometimes to exist as a durable object. The recipes and baking techniques are adjusted
accordingly, depending on intended function. Diptychs were a common early design format, given at
religious holidays and meant for keeping, not consumption. These are the origin of the contemporary
“...one often feels a sense of hesitation before biting into any of these imprinted cookies - not only the reluctance to destroy a small work of culinary folk art but also, when the image on the cookie is that of a person or an animal, the added sense of performing a symbolic act of cannibalism or the ritual slaughter of another living being. However, in some cultures the ingesting of these symbolic shapes is a positive act, a way of gaining the desirable attributes of the particular human or animal depicted on the cookie, such as the beauty of a fine lady or the strength of a lion.”137

Hudgins’ sentiments are not unrelated to those of Felipe Fernandez-Armesto in “Near A Thousand Tables”, when he considers the cultural meaning of cannibalism: “most cases of cannibalism concern self-transformation, the appropriation of power, the ritualization of the eater’s relationship with the eaten.”138 While Fernandez-Armesto is referring to human flesh and Hudgins to flour and sugar biscuits, in this context on symbolic and sociological levels these are not disconnected materials. Springerle cookies originally emerged from a mid-winter pagan celebration called Julfest, which included ritual sacrifice of animals. When people were too poor to buy an animal for religious sacrifice and feast rituals, they compensated by shaping edible dough into animal shapes.139 Thus, when considering the origins of these ornately ‘fanciful’ cookies, it becomes clear they are pointing towards a similar impulse expressed in innumerable human societies throughout history: that of transmutation through ritual food consumption. As exemplified in Chapter Two by the Paschal marzipan lambs and Breasts of Saint Agatha, eating an image can become a ritual act, sometimes holy and sometimes transgressive, but always charged with meaning.

iv. *Festa dei Morti / Day of the Dead*

Part of the function of religious rituals is to navigate the realities of death and loss. Food is perhaps the most pervasive reminder of the life-death cycle of which we all take part, and culinary culture has permeated death-related ritual through the ages. This is especially evident in Sicily during the Catholic holiday of the *Festa dei Morti*, or all-Soul’s Day, held annually on November 2nd, when it is believed that the spirits of dead ancestors and relatives come back to commune with the living. The practices involved mark a strong cultural inheritance from ancient Roman practices, where death rituals and feasting were interlocked. In her book *The Roman Banquet*, art historian Katherine M.D. Dunbabin writes that between the 1st century BC and 1st century A.D., “the great majority of representations of [skeletons] occur on objects connected in one way or another with drinking or the banquet.” In Byzantine Sicily, there is archeological evidence that the ancient pagan funerary rituals of food offerings and feasting continued to be practiced at Christian grave sites, and were thus absorbed into the Christian context. In ancient Rome, fava beans were connected with the dead and also attributed with the power to chase away bad spirits. Today in Sicily for November 2nd cookies called *fave dei morti* are baked into the shape of fava beans. Perhaps not coincidentally, these are made with a base of sugar and almonds like the *Martorana*.

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140 Valerie M. Hope, *Roman Death: Dying and the Dead in Ancient Rome*, (Continuum, 2009); Parasecoli, *Food Culture in Italy*, 163-180.

141 Dunbabin, *The Roman Banquet*, 133.


143 Parasecoli, *Food Culture in Italy*, 178.
One major reason that Sicily is famous for its traditions of la Festa dei Morti is the explosively bright colors that are a celebratory antidote to what is otherwise experienced as a day of grief and mourning.\textsuperscript{144} This playful attitude in the face of death is also an ancient theme, and one which - again - includes food culture. A third century B.C. Greek mosaic from Antiocheia, Turkey bears a reclining skeleton with two loaves of bread, a flask and glass of wine and text reading: “Be cheerful, Enjoy your life”.\textsuperscript{145} (fig. 24.1). Other well-known examples include the ‘butler skeleton’ mosaic of Pompeii which depicts a jaunty skeleton carrying two wine flasks, as well as the silver ‘skeleton cups’ of the Boscoreale treasure, found near Pompeii. (figs. 24.2 and 24.3). The pewter cups depict tragic and comic ancient Greek poets rendered as skeletons with an inscription reading, “enjoy life while you can, for tomorrow is uncertain” - the famous maxim of Epicurus.\textsuperscript{146}

Along with the flamboyant colors and celebratory atmosphere, a playful approach to the Day of the Dead is also seen through the inclusion of children in its rituals. A barrage of colorful toys and sweets are symbolically given to children by the spirits of the deceased. This happens amidst the other various traditions of paying homage to deceased relatives with candlelight vigils, cemetery visits and food offerings to placate their departed souls.\textsuperscript{147} (figs. 25.1 and 25.2). Thus, confectionaries are a central part of both the gifts from the sprits and the offerings to them, and the frutta Martorana is perhaps the most commonly used in both cases. Baskets of sweets


\textsuperscript{147} Moss, “Observations,” 134–135.

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filled with the Martorana are laid out for ancestors on altars on the eve of 1 November. On the morning of 2 November, children find toys and a basket of frutta at the foot of their bed, seemingly left by the spirits who came in the night. It is a two-way exchange: the souls of the deceased are appeased by the offerings, and they bless the children by leaving offerings of their own in kind.

Given that Sicily inherited ancient cultural practices surrounding death that are mediated by food and included an air of irreverence, perhaps it should not be surprising that the Festa dei Morti is celebrated with colorful and playful food cultural aspects. Additionally, given the sacred and positive associations of almonds from antiquity through the nineteenth century, as well as the Catholic convent origins of this sculptural confection, it should also not be surprising that the frutta Martorana were chosen as a major culinary protagonist to negotiate this liminal and dangerous territory between the dead and the living.

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148 This ‘colorful irreverence’ is especially marked when compared to how other Catholic countries celebrate and experience the same holiday in Northern Europe, where an emphasis is placed on the ghoulishness of All Hallow’s Eve, and All Souls Day is characterized by mournful solemnity. German poet Ranier Maria Rilke carried a life-long melancholic association with the month of November. He wrote on his childhood memories in Germany: “The second day of November is All Souls’ Day, which I, until my sixteenth or seventeenth year, no matter where I was living, always spent in graveyards, at unknown graves often and often at the graves of relatives and ancestors, at graves that I couldn’t explain and about which I had to meditate in the growing winter.” See Schuelke, “These November Days,” 179–186.
Conclusion: Remaking History

Just like the examples of the fourteenth century French supplication biscuits and the Austro-German Springerle cookies, the Martorana hold meaning beyond their form, and recipes can sometimes develop out of an understanding for inherited value of their separate ingredients. One of the earliest recorded mentions on the use of marzipan comes from 1095 A.D. in Sicily, which referred to molding a pesce di Natale, or Christmas fish. Almost one thousand years later, the pesce di Natale are still made with marzipan in Sicily today, (see fig. 7.1 for a contemporary example). Numerous combinations of honey, sugar and various seeds and nuts are recorded from antiquity onwards, although none of these combinations captured the imagination nor spiritual and religious impulses of multiple societies for centuries as much as this particular paste of ground sugar and almonds. In this it is a near-singular gastronomical mixture, perhaps akin only to bread or wine in its religious usage and associated mystical properties.

The art historian is, perhaps above all things, a detective, and her initial clues are found directly through the senses. She begins by looking, in some cases touching, smelling and even listening to the object to move the research in effective directions. Studying an edible object adds a poetic layer because now taste can be included in the investigations. Taste is intimately linked to personal memory, but also to the generations of those who have made and tasted the same recipe before. A palette is not static, and the way it functions is not a physiological response alone. It is shaped by the culture and society we grow up in, subject to psychological, emotional and environmental stimuli and also, remarkably, linked to knowledge. Thus the way we eat

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149 Barceló, Historia y Leyenda, 197. *While Toledo, Spain and Lübreck, Germany also lay claim to the invention of marzipan, it is this evidence that links Sicily as one strongly plausible origin.

can be similar to the way we see. Standing in the Bargello in Florence and looking at Donatello’s bronze David is a different experience when one has previously studied its history and forms, and the same principle applies with cuisine. Understanding origins and historical perceptions enlivens the mind and opens the palette through the power of imagination fueled by knowledge.

As food and travel journalist Matthew Fort expresses in his book on culinary explorations of Sicily, Sweet Honey, Bitter Lemons: “There is a sense of seamless continuum in Sicily. Indeed, the past always seemed to be present in the present.”\(^{151}\) And yet, when one looks closer, the Martorana currently reflect the ever-shifting economic and cultural climates that surround it - as is the nature of culinary culture. Contemporary food practices usually mean lowering production cost to maximize profit, and the Martorana are no exception. This translates into the addition of glucose, high fructose corn syrups, a lower ratio of almonds to sugar, and chemically produced and machine-applied pigmentation. A decreasing percentage of the Martorana are still made by hand, and new types of representations can be chosen for their projected sales, such as Halloween-themed Martorana that have far more to do with modern North American culture than Sicilian. (see fig. 7.4). As ingredients are imported from abroad, artisanal practices are outsourced to factories, and tourism grows and culture bends to support its gaze, these confections increasingly become mere souvenirs of a fading tradition. By including cuisine in the canon of art historical scholarship a critical component of gastronomy is acknowledged and can be fully explored: that of its central and spectacular visual and artistic legacies. Through this lens a more nuanced tether to tradition and history can be formed and, one can hope, the myriad of living culinary traditions that ‘recreate history’ everyday may be further

recognized as worthy of preserving, not as amusing pieces of kitsch or nostalgia, but as inherently worthy artistic contributions to the contemporary world.
Appendix

Given in two different Mediterranean countries, (Italy and Lebanon), 543 years apart, (1475 and 2018 respectively), each of these two marzipan recipes offer surprisingly similar directives: A full day soaking before grinding the almonds; a 50:50 ratio of ground sugar to ground almonds; the addition of a flower water, and a very mild baking that avoids toasting. While they are molded into different end product, the approach and treatment of the base material is almost identical.

“Pie Which They Call Marzapan” - Platina, Vatican Librarian, Rome, 1475

Make the pie which they call marzapan this way. Grind almonds which have stood in fresh water a day and a night and which are as carefully washed as possible, continually sprinkling lightly with fresh water so they will not produce oil. If you want the best, add as much of the best sugar as of almonds. When all has been well pounded and soaked in rose water, spread in a pan filled with a light undercrust and moistened often with rose water. Put in an oven, sprinkling continually with ground sugar with a bit of rose water so that it will not be dried too much. They can be cooked similarly on the hearth, but be careful they do not seem to be toasted rather than cooked. I would like this pie to be heavy rather than high, for it is better. I remember that I have eaten nothing more pleasant with my friend Patricius at Siena where they make it as a specialty. They are of the best nourishment, are well digested, help the chest, kidneys, and liver, increase fertility, arouse passion, and remove burning of the urine.152


Soak whole almonds overnight. Remove the skins by rubbing each almond between the tips of your fingers. Grind the tender, white almonds into a paste with a mortar and pestle. Mix the paste with finely ground sugar to a ratio of 1:1. Add a few drops of orange blossom water. Knead the dough until smooth, cover, rest overnight. Mold into petals by hand, and press the petal bases together in a spiral motion to create rose shapes. Place on a baking sheet and bake gently until barely toasted.153


153 on site interview by author, 17/09/18.
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- Monastery of San Nicolò l’Arena, Catania, Sicily.
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- Museum of the Almond, Favara, Sicily.
  September 25th-26th, 2018.
- Cosi Dunci Pastry Shop, Favara, Sicily.
  September 25th, 2018.
- Gallery and Enoteca Wine & Charme, Catania, Sicily.
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On-site Interviews:

- June di Schino: Baroque Food Historian. Rome, Italy.
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- Giuseppe Maimone: Publisher, Sicilian Art and Culture. Catania, Sicily.
  September 28th, 2018
- Carmelo Nicotra and Salvo Pirrello: Exhibition Coordinator and Assistant Director, Museum of
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  September 26th-27th, 2018.

Pending Site Visits:

“La Martorana” church, Palermo, Sicily.
Café Sicilia, Noto, Sicily.
Maria Grammatica’s Pastry Shop, Erice, Sicily.
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Pending Interviews:

- Carmelo Chiaramonte: Chef, Author and Performer. Catania, Sicily.
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Fig. 17: Artist Unknown, “Banquet in the Court of Versailles,” engraving, 1676. Source: Reed, Marcia, Ed. The Edible Monument: The Art of Food for Festivals. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2015.

Fig. 17.2. Artist Unknown, “Macchina di Cuccagna,” engraving, 1732. Accessed 08-12-18. http://www.getty.edu/about/whatwedo/opencontent.html

Fig. 18.1. Miller, Rissa, “Martorana Display,” Cosi Dunci Pastry Shop, Favara. September 2018.

Fig. 18.2. Miller, Rissa, “Martorana Display, Unknown Caffé,” Catania, September 2018.


Fig. 19.2: Guttoso, Renato, “La Vucciria,” Oil on Canvas 300 x 300 cm, Palazzo Steri, Palermo, 1974, Accessed 17-12-18, http://myartguides.com/destinations/europe/italy/palermo/
Fig. 20.1 Unknown Artists, “Pupi di Zucchero,” Accessed 30-11-18, https://www.siciliabella.eu/i-pupi-di-zucchero.html

Fig. 20.2 Unknown Artists, “Pupi di Opera,” Accessed 30-11-18, http://www.mandorloinfiore.events/index.php/event/opera-dei-pupi-2/

Fig. 21.1: Unknown Artist, photo Miller, Rissa, “Marzipan Lemon,” Marzipan, pigment, resin, Nonna Vincenza Pastry Shop, Catania, 2018.

Fig. 21.2: Unknown Artist, photo Miller, Rissa, “Felted Wool in the likenesses of the Breasts of Saint Agatha and Martorana Peperoncino and Martorana Tomatoes,” Catania, 2018.


Fig. 23.2: Fig. 23.2. Unknown Artist, photo by Miller, Rissa, “A contemporary version of Catania’s city emblem,” postcard, paper and digital ink, 8 x 10.5 cm, Catania, 2018.


Fig. 24.3. Unknown Artist, “Skeleton Cups,” Boscoreale Treasure, c. 1st C BC - early 1st c. AD. Silver with gold plating, Muséé du Louvre, Paris.


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Fig. 1.1
Frutta Martorana Market Stall, Perugia, December 2018. Photo by Katherine Cahill.

Fig. 1.2
Unknown Artist, Frutta Martorana, Cosi Dunci Pastry Shop, Favara. Marzipan, pigment, gum arabic. Watermelon 4 x 2 cm; Strawberry 3 x 2.5 cm; Pear 3.5 x 2.5 cm. 2018. Photo by Rissa Miller.
Fig. 2.2

Fig. 2.1
Fig. 3.1
Mezquita-Catedral de Córdoba, Completed 987 AD, Prayer Hall, Interior.

Fig. 3.2 Mezquita-Catedral de Córdoba, completed 987 AD, Mihrab, Interior.

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Fig. 4.1

Fig. 4.2
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Fig. 6.1

Fig. 6.2


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Fig. 16.2. Alexandre Françoise Desportes, “Credenza Still Life,” c.1720. in Reed, Marcia, Ed. The Edible Monument: The Art of Food for Festivals. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2015.
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